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PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER: *Joel Davis*

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

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a **NEW** Turnbuckle story by

JACK RITCHIE

This may be the strangest case in the career of Henry Turnbuckle, "the bonded and licensed private detective from Milwaukee." One might say that Turnbuckle was involved up to his eyebrows—but not over his head... Another of Jack Ritchie's inimitable yarns...

THE MIDNIGHT STRANGLER

by **JACK RITCHIE**

I had been just about to enter my automobile when a half dozen flashlight beams were directed on my person and I was peremptorily admonished not to move or I would have my head blown off. In an instant more I was surrounded by at least 20 men, half of them in police uniform.

I realized that this was certainly not the proper time to argue, but I did pose a question. "Gentlemen, what is this all about?"

No one chose to answer. Instead I was thoroughly searched, handcuffed, and whisked into a waiting patrol car. In another moment we were off, sirens wailing, despite which it took us nearly fifteen minutes of threading our way through the congested evening traffic to reach police headquarters.

There I was pushed and pulled through a horde of what appeared to be newspaper reporters with questions, hustled into an elevator, and finally ushered into a small room on one of the upper floors.

A huge florid individual in mufti, who had been at my elbow throughout my journey, glared at his entourage. "How come I find all those reporters waiting downstairs? I'll bet one of you clowns phoned the papers ten seconds after we picked him up."

No one met his eyes and I thought I detected some anonymous shuffling of feet.

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"All right," he snapped. "Now all of you get the hell out of here and somebody find Sergeant Wiggins and tell him that we caught his Midnight Strangler. If he doesn't know already."

It was a bit warm in the room, so I reached into my topcoat pocket for a handkerchief with which to dab at my forehead. I found no handkerchief, but my fingers did close on a small card. I brought it out and discovered it was the business card of one Clarence Darrow Theobault. Attorney-at-law. Trial work.

Evidently the welcoming throng down below had included at least one lawyer who had taken the opportunity to slip his card into my pocket as I was being muscled through.

The huge man sat down on a chair opposite me. "I am Captain McGillicutty. Of Homicide."

I took off my topcoat and sat down. "I gather you are under the impression that I am the Midnight Strangler?"

McGillicutty allowed himself a tight smile. "So you *have* heard of him?"

"Of course."

And as I remembered, the Midnight Strangler had so far claimed seven victims, all of them men. The group had included a sociology professor, chiropractor, dentist, school bus driver, tool and die maker, sewer inspector, and linoleum layer—all of them between the ages of 46 and 54.

Actually the appellation Nine O'Clock Strangler would have been more apt, though not as catchy. All the victims seemed to have been pounced on by the strangler after they parked their automobiles for the evening in their respective driveways, garages, or breezeways, the deaths occurring between the hours of eight and ten. And on each of their foreheads there had been imprinted—apparently with a rubber stamp—the words, "Sinners must pay."

The door opened and a tall thin man whose expression indicated a headache, entered the room.

McGillicutty introduced him. "This is Sergeant Wiggins."

Wiggins regarded me curiously. "Has anybody read him his rights?"

McGillicutty thought about that. "Come to think of it, no. In all the excitement we forgot." He turned to me. "You have the right to remain silent. You have..." He faltered. "How does it go, Wiggins?"

"It's on that little celluloid card, Captain. The one we're sup-

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McGillicutty smiled patiently. "I haven't personally made an arrest in ten years and I don't know where my damn card is."

Wiggins handed his over and McGillicutty read the words. That over, he returned the card and said, "Well, do you want a lawyer?"

"I don't think that will be necessary."

Wiggins showed teeth. "Believe me, it will be necessary." He seemed rather happy about my situation. "Is there anything we can do to make you feel more comfortable? Care for a cigarette? Coffee? Can I hang up your topcoat? Should we send out for some sandwiches?"

I declined the food, drink, and cigarette, but handed him my topcoat, after first removing Theobault's card from the pocket. "Gentlemen, I am not your Midnight Strangler. My name is Henry Turnbuckle and I am a bonded licensed private detective based in Milwaukee, as you have no doubt ascertained from the credentials in my wallet."

Wiggins blinked. "Is that right, Captain? Is he a private detective?"

McGillicutty nodded. "That's what his wallet says. But I don't take that as a guarantee that he can't be the Midnight Strangler."

I examined Theobault's card once more. "I am utterly innocent and therefore do not require legal aid. However I am rather curious about what I could get. Would I be going wrong if I sought to retain a Clarence Darrow Theobault of your city? I believe that he's downstairs at this very moment."

McGillicutty scowled at the mention of the name. "All right, Wiggins, see if Theobault's downstairs. And he probably is. This is his kind of case."

Wiggins returned in ten minutes with a tall loping individual whose arms seemed a bit long for his body.

His large powerful hand enveloped mine in a pressure grip. "My name is Theobault. Clarence Darrow Theobault. Perhaps you've heard of me? I *do* hope you haven't told the police anything? And if you have it was undoubtedly under duress."

"So far I have had the opportunity to give hardly more than my name and occupation."

He rubbed his hands. "Excellent. Very clever and clear-headed of you." He turned to McGillicutty. "I would like to speak to my client alone."

Theobault watched them leave and then regarded me with a somewhat sharkish smile.

"One moment," I said quickly. "I have not officially retained you as yet. Let us first establish that this is a preliminary conference and that it does not cost me one red cent."

"But of course, of course," Theobault said. "You are under no obligation."

"How much do you charge for defending a man accused of murder?"

He chuckled. "My dear sir, there are no set fees in matters like this. One cannot anticipate the expenses involved. My fees are elastic, but one must not really be concerned with mere money at a time like this. Your life is at stake. We must see that you receive at least a lengthy trial. By the way, what is your profession?"

"I am a private detective."

He gave that dubious thought. "You are the head of an agency? Or at least an executive in the firm?"

"No. I don't even have a secretary. Frankly, the private detecting business hasn't been going all that well. Maybe I should plead indigence and have the court appoint an attorney for me?"

He quickly closed the gap. "Nonsense, nonsense. All is not lost. This is much too important a case to entrust to some fledgling lawyer. We will come to some mutually acceptable monetary arrangement, I am sure. Now, we will plead not guilty by reason of insanity."

"But I am innocent. And sane."

"Of course you are. Of course." He sat down beside me and lowered his voice slightly. "Now, I don't want you to say a single word to any newspaper reporter, or to any writer for a magazine, and don't talk into anybody's tape recorder. Tell those people to come to me first. I'll be handling your affairs and we've got to keep exclusive rights. There's no point in handing out anything for free. We get a cut of all the action and that includes interviews, tapes, television, and the movies."

I frowned. "It was my understanding that a murderer is not allowed to profit from his crimes."

Theobault laughed lightly. "Of course a murderer is not allowed to profit from his crime. But, after all, he's got to have money if he wants to be defended by a competent, experienced attorney and that isn't *really* profiting from his crime, now is it? Besides, there

are all kinds of technicalities involved. A *sane* murderer obviously shouldn't be allowed to profit from his crime. But does this hold true for an *insane* murderer? After all, can he be held responsible if somehow he picked up a buck or two? It's just something that happened to him. Like an act of God. Leave everything to me."

"Do you think you can get me an acquittal?"

He winced. "That would kill our movie sale. Who cares about the life story of an innocent man?"

There was a knock on the door and it opened. McGillicutty looked in. "Are you two through yet?"

I nodded. "I rather think so."

Theobault patted my shoulder. "Don't answer any questions unless I give you the nod."

McGillicutty and Wiggins brought a third man into the room. "This is Oscar Vandermeir."

Oscar Vandermeir was a hulking pot-bellied man with large baby-blue eyes. He stared at me curiously. "So this is the Midnight Strangler?"

McGillicutty nodded. "Have you ever seen him before?"

Vandermeir walked first to one side of me and then to the other. "Well, he's not one of my customers. Unless maybe he wore a beard. But actually he's not the type which comes into my store at all. Mostly they're late middle-age and ninety-nine percent of them are men. But what with this Women's Lib, who knows but what that might change. And usually they're single, though I suppose once in a while I get a married man."

Theobault spoke up. "Just who is this man and what does he have to do with the case against my client?"

McGillicutty smiled. "Mr. Vandermeir is the proprietor of the AAA Acme Adult Book Store. Perhaps you've heard of it, eh, Turnbuckle?" He turned back to Vandermeir. "All right, Oscar, tell them all about it."

"Well," Vandermeir said, "I'm not the type of person who goes to the police. Usually they come to me. Or at least they did a lot. But times change." He side-tracked in reminiscence. "In the old days I had to fill my store with those dusty second-hand books that were classics and so on. I kept the real stuff in the back room. And you never knew which customer might be a cop. I'd get arrested half a dozen times a year and my place was once shut down for sixty days. But things are different now. More honest. More sophisticated. No hypocrisy." His blue eyes were thoughtful.

"Except maybe for the word adult."

McGillicutty prodded him back. "Get on with the story."

Vandermeir nodded. "Anyway, I don't read the papers much. All that print is bad for the eyes. But I heard people talk about the Midnight Strangler and so when he wipes out his fifth man, I get hold of a newspaper and lo and behold the picture on the front page is that of one of my best customers, though I don't know his name until I read it. My clientele don't usually volunteer names unless they want to get on a special mailing list.

"So I think, what a coincidence, and nothing more. Then comes the sixth murder and I see that I lost another good customer.

"But still two coincidences don't make enough coincidences for me to go to the cops. But I wait for number seven. And sure enough, again it's one of my regulars who's deep into flagellation among Transylvanians. So I decided that I ought to tell the police, even though they never done anything for me. And here at headquarters I look at pictures of all the other victims and I recognize all but two."

I rubbed my jaw. "Why would the strangler kill five people who were your customers and two who were not?"

Vandermeir shrugged. "I'm not saying those two weren't my customers. I'm just saying I didn't recognize them. A lot of my people feel that they got to wear false beards and mustaches and wear dark-green glasses."

"Ah, yes," I said wisely. "Apparently the strangler feels strongly about the kind of people who patronize adult bookstores and thus make them profitable to operate. He feels justified—possibly even cosmically called upon—to rid the world of sin. This particular kind, anyway."

McGillicutty regarded me pointedly. "Why didn't this strangler just kill Vandermeir and get it over with?"

I shrugged. "I rather suspect that he was saving Vandermeir as the *pièce de résistance*."

McGillicutty folded his arms. "We've had a stakeout on Vandermeir's store for two days now. We saw one of his customers come out of the store, and we saw you step out of a dark doorway and follow him."

"That was Homer Schleigel," I said.

"And who is Homer Schleigel?"

"Once a week, on Thursdays, Homer Schleigel goes bowling. Or he claims to. Only last week he forgot to take his bowling ball

along. When he got back home at about eleven that night, his wife asked him how the bowling had gone, meaning to twit him on forgetting his ball and assuming that he had been forced to use one of the balls provided to the public by bowling alleys. He had said fine, fine, that he'd rolled a 600 series, and that the old ball was operating better than ever.

"His wife lapsed into silence and suspicion. The next day she phoned Hanlon's Pizza, which was the name on the back of her husband's bowling shirt, and discovered that Homer had quit the team some six months before. She would have followed him the next Thursday—which is today—except that they aren't a two-car family. So she hired me to find out what he's been up to."

I called to mind Homer's movements. "He left Milwaukee at six-thirty. It is a half an hour drive south to this city. He put his car in the Apex Parking Lot. He then walked to the Tivoli, where he saw *Deeper Esophagus*, which I understand is a sequel. At its conclusion he stopped in at Mac's Malt Shop for a pistachio sundae. He then resumed walking with a purpose, eventually entering Vandermeir's establishment. He did some extensive browsing and then made a few purchases. He returned to the Apex Parking Lot and reclaimed his auto. I was about to do the same for my vehicle and follow him when you people descended on me. Homer is probably back in Milwaukee by now."

Sergeant Wiggins had been listening hostilely. "I got no use for private detectives."

I sighed. "I had hoped to ride out this storm on my own strength, however I see that I do need help. Actually I am a member of the Milwaukee police department. I believe that should carry some weight. At the moment I am on educational leave. I am working on my masters degree and my subject is the function of the private detective in our society and it seemed to me that I could hardly learn more about the field than by becoming a private detective myself."

McGillicutty turned to Sergeant Wiggins. "Check that out."

Wiggins left the room and McGillicutty also excused Vandermeir.

He got back to me. "Just because you're a regular cop doesn't mean that you automatically can't be the strangler. We'll check you out and we'll check you out good."

My eyes had been drawn to my topcoat hanging on the wall peg. I distinctly remembered reaching into the right-hand pocket

for a handkerchief, finding none, but instead finding Theobault's card. That pocket should now be empty, and yet there seemed to be a slight bulge there. It rather piqued my curiosity.

I rose and went to the coat. I slipped my hand into the pocket and it closed on an object. I pulled it out. It was a small rubber stamp. I tested it on the back of my hand and could just make out the faint words, "Sinners must pay."

"Well," I said accurately. "Well, *well*."

McGillicutty had, of course, been watching me. So had Theobault. The latter rose to his feet. "Turnbuckle," he commanded. "Don't say another word."

"Shut up," McGillicutty said, and I rather agreed with him. McGillicutty and I sat down again, facing each other. McGillicutty began darkly to think.

"Captain," I said, "when I was arrested, I was thoroughly searched, was I not?"

He agreed reluctantly. "I searched you myself. No stamp." He sighed. "The strangler knew that we were watching the store. Hell, he probably saw us—there were enough of us scattered around. He saw us pick you up. He realized that if we were watching Vandermeir's store that we must have found the key to the string of murders. He decided he might as well call it quits. He also figured this was a good opportunity to nail the case down so that we wouldn't be looking for the strangler any more. He rushed over to the station, waited in the crowd, and while you were being hustled through he planted the stamp in your pocket. Just like Theobault planted the card."

McGillicutty eyed Theobault.

Theobault flushed. "I am not the strangler. All I slipped into Turnbuckle's pocket was my card." Nevertheless, he looked down at his huge hands and seemed to be trying to think them small.

"No, Captain," I said. "Theobault did not slip the stamp into my pocket. When I came into this room, I reached into that pocket for a handkerchief. I found no handkerchief, but I did find his card. However, *only* his card. No rubber stamp."

McGillicutty frowned. "You mean that the stamp was planted in your pocket *after* you got into this room?"

"That's right, Captain."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you saying that *I* planted that stamp in your coat?"

"No. I have been sitting here in this chair and the topcoat has

been in my sight continuously. I know that you did not approach it."

"Vandermeir? He murders his own customers because he's got a guilt complex about how he makes his money?"

"No. Not Vandermeir either."

"Then who the hell else is there?"

"Captain, was Sergeant Wiggins on the stakeout at Vandermeir's store?"

"No, this was strictly a homicide show."

"Isn't Wiggins in Homicide?"

"No, he's with the vice squad. But naturally he's got an interest in the case and so I sent for him when I brought you in."

"Captain," I said, "the only person who touched my topcoat after I entered this room was Sergeant Wiggins when he so graciously hung it on that peg."

McGillicutty closed his eyes.

I nodded. "Wiggins was here at headquarters when you brought me in and he realized that this was a perfect opportunity to frame me and close the case. Evidently he didn't have the opportunity to slip the stamp into my pocket as I was being pushed through the crowd downstairs. Or he simply didn't have the stamp on him. But it must have been near somewhere, because between the time I arrived here at headquarters and the time he appeared in this room I doubt if he would have had time to drive home, retrieve the stamp, and return."

McGillicutty sighed. "He lives way out near the county line—at least an hour round trip. And he's been pretty upset about the new porno laws. And he's got those damn headaches all the time . . ."

"He was hoping I would be searched again as a matter of routine and the stamp found. Or he might have even planned to suggest another search himself."

I put the stamp back into the pocket of my topcoat and returned it to the wall peg. "However, I wager that now Wiggins will attempt to *unframe* me."

That got McGillicutty's attention. "Unframe?"

"Yes. Because it is one thing to frame a simple private detective for murder, but it is quite another to attempt to do the same to a legitimate policeman who has the rank of detective-sergeant and an unblemished record. Too many questions would be asked, there would be too much probing, and the truth would probably come

out. No, Wiggins has to unframe me now."

"And how is he going to do that?"

"When he returns and sees that we have apparently not yet found the stamp, he will invent some reason for approaching my topcoat. He will surreptitiously remove the stamp."

Wiggins returned some five minutes later. "He's a cop all right, Captain. A detective-sergeant." Wiggins licked his lips. "Well, I suppose we'll just have to hand him his topcoat and let him go. Right? We all made a mistake." He moved to the topcoat and for perhaps two or three seconds his back effectively shielded it from our view.

He turned and brought me the coat.

McGillicutty and I studied the contours of Wiggins' suit and probably arrived at the mutual suspicion that the small bulge in the right side pocket of his suitcoat was now formed by a rubber stamp.

"Wiggins," McGillicutty said, "what is that bulge in your right-hand pocket?"

Wiggins did not look down. "Nothing, Captain. Nothing. Maybe my key ring or something."

McGillicutty was insistent. "Let's see it, Wiggins."

"Captain," I said. "When one finds a rubber stamp, can a stamp pad be far behind? You don't suppose that if we looked in his locker, or perhaps in his automobile, we might find a stamp pad and that if this stamp pad were subjected to laboratory scrutiny we might even find on this pad several vestigial impressions of the words, 'Sinners must pay'?"

Wiggins lost his color. "Damn you, nobody has the right to search my car." Then he stared at the revolver Captain McGillicutty had pointed at him and he pulled himself together. "I refuse to say another word until I see my lawyer."

Theobault rose and rubbed his huge hands. "If you don't mind, Captain, I'd like to speak to my client alone."

"Q"